

Working with Intermediaries

Global Grant Making through Partner Organizations

A Closer Look

Grant makers frequently ask us for more on various issues that come up in our guides. Our response is a web-only series, *A Closer Look*. For each edition, we invite several experienced grant makers to explore a specific topic and answer questions about how it applies in their own work and inside their foundations.

This edition of *A Closer Look* written by Yumi Sera, expands on GrantCraft's guide *International Grant Making: Funding with a Global View*. The guide looks broadly at international giving. It includes a chapter on funding through intermediary organizations, which contains useful definitions of intermediary types and other information. Both publications are available at www.grantcraft.org

For many foundations and other donors, the question “How can we support international projects?” has an easy answer: **fund through an intermediary organization. As a follow-up to the GrantCraft guide *International Grant Making: Funding with a Global View*, we asked a handful of experienced grant makers and other experts about how the relationship between donor and intermediary really works and the advantages and trade-offs involved in working through an international intermediary.**

■ **Rob Buchanan, director of international programs at the Council on Foundations.**

The Council's International Program facilitates responsible and effective grant making for international purposes among its members, the public, and the U.S. government and supports philanthropy as an essential part of civil society.

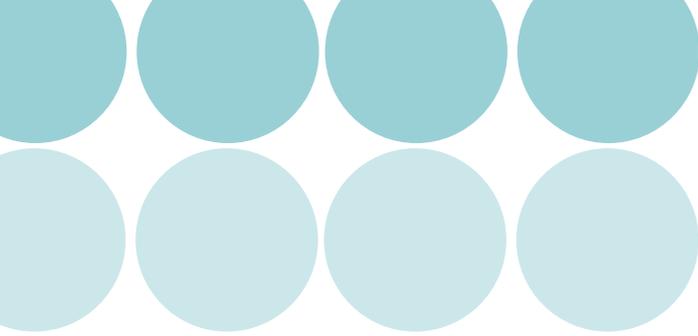
■ **Sarah Hobson, executive director of the New Field Foundation.** The New Field Foundation supports women and their families to overcome poverty, violence, and injustice in their communities. Its current focus is sub-Saharan Africa.

■ **Natalia Kanem, president, and Elan Garonzik, vice president of programs, at ELMA Philanthropies Services (U.S.), Inc.** The foundation seeks to improve the life prospects of African children and youth, and of the families and communities that care for them, by building African capacity to relieve poverty, advance education, and promote health.

■ **Alan Okada, chief administrative officer of the Citi Foundation.** Working with a global network of Citi colleagues and nonprofits, the foundation supports programs in financial education, community building, and entrepreneurship. In 2006, giving by the Citi Foundation supported projects in 86 countries and territories.

■ **Ken Wilson, executive director, and Wolde Tadesse, program officer for the African Rift Valley, at the Christensen Fund, with Girma Zenebe, director of the Culture and Art Society of Ethiopia, a Christensen Fund grantee and intermediary.** The Christensen Fund focuses its grant making on the interface between natural environments and human cultures in five priority geographic regions of the world.

■ **Chet Tchozewski, executive director of the Global Greengrants Fund.** Global Greengrants is a public charity and intermediary organization that receives support from foundations and individual donors and provides small grants to grassroots environmental groups around the world. Since 1993, the organization has provided more than 3,000 grants in 120 countries.



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WHAT IS AN INTERMEDIARY ORGANIZATION?

The term “intermediary organization” has no single, accepted definition in international philanthropy. Some grant makers prefer “funding partner,” or simply “partner,” to reflect the importance of collaboration in the relationship.

In this document, written mainly with U.S. funders in mind, we define “intermediary” as an organization (not an individual) that provides specialized expertise to foundations and other donors, in particular through the regranteeing of funds to organizations and projects outside the United States. An intermediary’s expertise may include legal knowledge of U.S. and other governments’ guidelines, a deep understanding of a specific issue or region of the world, or capacity building and other support to grantee organizations.

Reflecting on a funder’s relationship with an intermediary, Rob Buchanan explained, “An intermediary can be an advisor, an administrator, and a grant maker on your behalf. Some intermediaries are also program builders and network builders. They don’t just process grants. Topically focused intermediaries have their own strategies and objectives, and they fit your grant into that larger strategy. Other intermediaries are simply there to help you get your grant where you want it to go; they don’t have a particular strategy of their own, other than doing it in a professional and legal manner.”

As for the location of intermediary organizations, Buchanan offered a further explanation: “The term ‘intermediary’ can refer to both U.S.-based public charities that facilitate international grants, and organizations around the world that facilitate regranteeing to local organizations and communities.” Some funders work with both. “A significant part of our funding goes to two types of high-quality intermediary organization,” Sarah Hobson explained: “U.S.-based organizations making grants to dynamic groups in Africa, and strong Africa-based, Africa-led organizations making grants to rural women’s groups with which they have strong working relationships.”

TO LEARN MORE

Foundation Center (www.foundationcenter.org). *Toward More Effective Use of Intermediaries*, Peter L. Szanton. This report is part of the Foundation Center’s series Practice Matters: The Improving Philanthropy Project.

Grantmakers Without Borders (www.gwob.net). Gw/oB offers an extensive section of advice for grant makers on its website, including materials on working with intermediaries and a free International Grantmaking Resource Packet.

The Philanthropic Initiative (www.tpi.org). *Diaspora Philanthropy: New Roles and Emerging Models*, Paula Johnson. Products of this research project, part of the Strengthening Global Philanthropy Initiative, include an overview of diaspora philanthropy, case studies, and a list of organizations that support diaspora giving initiatives.

United States International Grantmaking (www.usig.org). A project of the Council of Foundations in partnership with the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, USIG maintains a wide range of resources, including current U.S. government regulations for international grant making and its 2007 publication, *Principles of Accountability for International Philanthropy*. The USIG website also includes a substantial list of “intermediary/partner” organizations, sorted by mission and geographic area.

Q: WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF WORKING WITH AN INTERMEDIARY ORGANIZATION?

ROB BUCHANAN: There are several. First, you get advice on possible grantees and strategies based on the intermediary's extensive experience, knowledge, and networks. This is particularly useful if you're not familiar with the country where you want to make a grant or you're not sure how to structure your grant. Intermediaries can be the eyes and ears of foundations on the ground and pick up new developments and new organizations that are coming into existence.

Getting advice on IRS rules and regulations is also an important advantage, especially if you're a small private foundation without professional staff or a small corporate grant making office. Even if you're in a larger foundation, an intermediary can be helpful if you want to make a grant that's outside your normal programming or in a country where you don't normally fund, since intermediaries can be very knowledgeable about the legal requirements of the country where the grant is going. Intermediaries also offer administrative support. An intermediary can be helpful to a small foundation or corporate funder that's overstretched and doesn't have the time or resources to handle the paperwork, due diligence, and follow-up required for international grants. Very often, foundations decide that it's more cost effective to work with an intermediary organization than to do it all in house.

SARAH HOBSON: Funding an intermediary that wants to engage with you is a tremendous advantage when you're getting started with international grant making. The intermediary can provide contacts and access so that you can build direct relationships and make direct grants, if that's the route you want to go, or you can just learn through the intermediary. You have the chance of getting money to initiatives and groups that you wouldn't otherwise

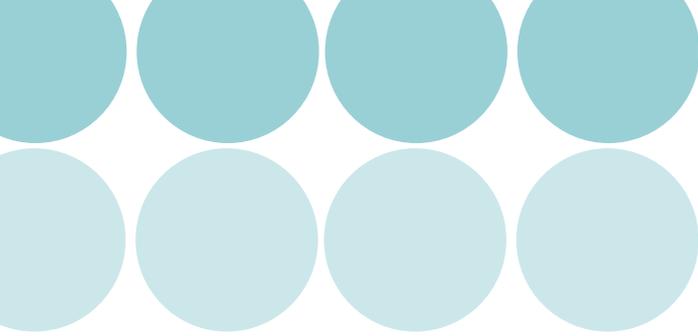
HOW INTERMEDIARIES WORK

Chet Tchozewski describes the Global Greengrants Fund

Our approach came from the environmental movement itself. People in the international environmental movement, myself included, saw a need for a funding mechanism that could do several things that weren't being done 15 years ago. One was to give U.S. environmental donors the ability to make tax-deductible gifts that could eventually get to environmental groups outside the U.S., particularly in developing countries. A second objective was to do that in a way that would make it practical and cost-effective to make grants of less than US\$5,000 without spending more on due diligence and administration and bank wire transfers than the value of the grant. Third, it was important to do both those things with a kind of "value added," informed by the local knowledge of social movement leaders and environmental activists.

Those ideas blended together to create the Global Greengrants Fund. Our approach gives us a comparative advantage to do just those things and not much else. We stay very focused on making cost-effective, small grants informed by a global network of local volunteer advisors. We make about 700 grants a year, averaging about US\$3,900 at an average fixed cost of about US\$1,900. It doesn't sound great — the cost is about 50 percent of the value of the grant itself — but it's quite a significant improvement over the next best alternative for international small grant making in environmental issues or any other purpose that we're aware of.

Our model capitalizes on our knowledge of private foundations and individual major donors in the U.S. and to a certain extent in Europe. We understand individuals' needs for tax deductions. We also know that everyone wants grants to be made properly and cost effectively. We achieve that largely through a high level of cost controls and integration of volunteer efforts. Probably most important is our ability to tap into a preexisting social network of environmental activists around the world, who appreciate that we ask them with very few strings attached to decide how to use the money that we raise for their region, country, or issue. We also learn from other international intermediaries, both in our field and in parallel social movements such as the women's movement, the human rights movement, the peace movement, and the labor movement.



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have the means to reach. You also get a cultural competence, which means that your funding can be more sensitive, appropriate, and useful.

We’re very interested in getting funding directly to Africa-led organizations to support and build their capacity, as well as the capacity of the groups they work with. In particular, we want to reach rural women in West Africa, so we fund a number of organizations that could be termed farmers’ associations. One organization, for example, has about 3,000 members, organized into about 33 farmers’ groups. We give one sizeable grant to the main organization, which in turn makes community grants to farmers’ groups. The organization also provides technical support to groups to help them manage their grant, keep accounts, and be successful in realizing their community grant activities. With this approach, we hope to build capacity at different levels in an interconnected way, which reduces bureaucracy and builds relationships.

ALAN OKADA: When we started, we needed a way to ramp up relatively quickly. We chose to use two mechanisms: a variety of donor-advised funds at public charities, such as United Way International and Charities Aid Foundation America, and working through international organizations that were affiliated with or had chapters in many different countries, such as Habitat for Humanity and Junior Achievement International. In a nutshell, our approach let us get started in a short period of time without adding lots of staff and lawyers in-house. It also let us make grants in many places.

ELAN GARONZIK: Intermediary organizations allow us to achieve a far broader reach with our programming dollars than we could on our own. This is particularly true when the intermediary is making small grants of US\$5,000 or US\$10,000 to grassroots groups, which would be hard for a larger institution to make. We have a concern for children with disabilities, and we’re leveraging our funds against other monies to create a pool for regranting by the Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund. Their status as a skilled, dependable, leading South African public charity makes that sort of leveraging possible.

Q: WHAT ARE SOME OF THE TRADE-OFFS INVOLVED IN WORKING WITH INTERMEDIARIES?

ROB BUCHANAN: You get some advantages from working with an intermediary organization, but you also give up some things in the process. First of all, you give up control of your philanthropic resources. If you’re a U.S. foundation and you make a grant to a public charity intermediary organization, you’ve made your grant to that organization. Normally, you have an agreement with that organization, usually in writing, about how you would like your grant to be used. The agreement is based on preliminary conversations about what the possibilities are, what sorts of options and choices the intermediary organization can propose for the donating foundation. But as a technical, legal matter, once you make the grant to an organization, the funds belong to that organization.

“When you work with an intermediary, you’re putting another organization between you and the ultimate grantee.”

That leads to what some people see as the next downside of working with intermediaries: you don’t have a direct connection with the grantee, at least not to the same extent that you would if your foundation made the grant directly to the grantee organization. When you work with an intermediary, you’re putting another organization between you and the ultimate grantee organization. For some foundations, that’s fine. Others want to have a direct, close, and ongoing relationship with their grantees. They want to be able to visit and look at how the funds are being used, engage in mutual learning activities, and be more directly involved with the work of the organization. For instance, a foundation may want to be able to support the grantee over a period of time and build their capacity.

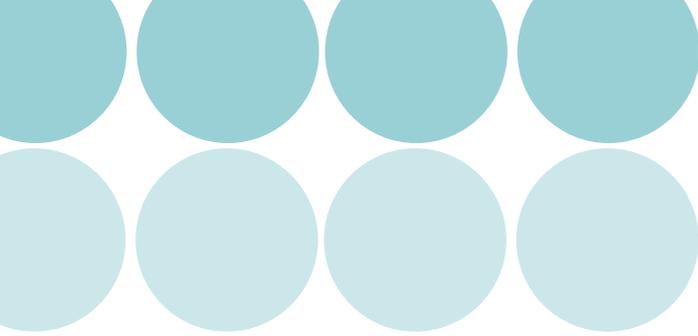
Another potential downside is that a funder might feel that it’s not necessary to worry about anti-terrorism issues, thinking that it’s the intermediary’s responsibility to worry about those things. A false sense of security may arise in that kind of situation. It is not clear that you would be absolved of responsibility if the worst were to happen and some of your funds were to be traced back from a terrorist organization to your grant to that intermediary. You have to assume that you still have responsibility, even if your funds are regranted down the chain.

ALAN OKADA: When you work with an intermediary, there’s sometimes a problem in identification of your support. We’ve established a Citi Foundation Fund at each of the intermediary organizations we support, but the grants are conveyed through those organizations. The recipient may only see the United Way or the Charities Aid Foundation and begin to lose the connection to the Citi Foundation.

NATALIA KANEM: When they’re not at their best, intermediaries can act as gatekeepers. They’re accountable to their donors or to the public that supports them, but they’re not necessarily responsible to the ultimate beneficiary. That said, high-quality intermediaries often have real familiarity with the local scene and can be a boon to local organizations. A good intermediary understands the local culture, the local politics, and the landscape in a way that the big donor can’t. Delegating the hands-on capacity-building work to the intermediary means that they are frequently on the scene as opposed to managing from afar.

ELAN GARONZIK: One disadvantage is that you can be removed from your objective on the ground. As a program officer, you know the problems of the intermediary institution, not the grantees, and you can get focused on that rather than on improving service delivery or whatever you aim to be doing.

CHET TCHOZEWSKI: One of the dangers of working with intermediaries is that, every time you add someone in the middle, it’s likely to increase handling costs. It’s also likely to create bottlenecks, which can also increase costs and slow down responsiveness. Intermediaries try to solve those problems by staying focused on being nimble, unbureaucratic, and cost-effective, but the problems are undeniable.



“In our discussions with the intermediary, we establish early on that we want to be part of the dialogue.”

What do you look for when selecting an intermediary organization?
Use our matrix on page 10.

Q: WHAT DO YOU LOOK FOR WHEN SELECTING AN INTERMEDIARY ORGANIZATION?

ROB BUCHANAN: The choice of the intermediary is crucial. There needs to be the right match in terms of what you’re looking for and what that intermediary organization has to offer because they don’t all have the same focus or offer the same services. There’s a range of services intermediary organizations can provide: from identifying an appropriate NGO at the front end to performing due diligence; from handling the evidentiary paperwork to administering the grant. They can also transfer funds, follow up to do the monitoring on the grant, and make sure that reports come back when they’re supposed to. If a foundation wants to do some of those things itself, it can work out an agreement with the intermediary organization. Normally, it’s a negotiable process.

It also depends on where the funding organization is coming from. For example, if you want to fund girls’ education in Afghanistan, but don’t know enough about the NGOs in that country, you might go to Give to Asia and they would come back to you and say, “Well, we have these options for giving around girls’ education in Afghanistan, and this is the one we recommend to you.”

Then there’s the funding organization that knows exactly whom it wants to fund. They’ve encountered an organization and done some research and been impressed with it. Maybe it’s a small family foundation, run by the trustees with no professional staff. They don’t have the time or expertise to do all the due diligence required to make a direct grant to the organization they’ve identified. Or the funder may be a corporate grant maker that’s very small-staffed, trying to do a lot of grant making in many different countries around the world. They just don’t have the time to do all the paperwork and administration of the grant, the follow-up, the reports, and that sort of thing. In either case, the funder could make the grant to an intermediary organization which, for a fee, would do all that for them.

SARAH HOBSON: When we’re looking at an intermediary, in addition to looking at their mission, vision, and program, we look at their ability to provide both grants and training and technical support to the groups they’re making grants to. The level of their ability to do so varies according to the organization, so we’re interested in supporting them to strengthen themselves in ways that benefit the groups. We also ask intermediaries to demonstrate that they have an active and ongoing relationship with the groups they fund, are responsive and flexible in the way they work with them, and make it a priority to strengthen those groups. In our discussions with the intermediary, we establish early on that we want to be part of the dialogue about how rural women and their families bring about change, and that, on occasion, we would appreciate direct contact with the women’s groups that are receiving community grants through the intermediary. There are no easy answers, and so we want to be informed and alert so that we also can modify our grant-making approach. We don’t want to be intrusive, and we’re not there as watchdogs.

INTERMEDIARIES AS WINDOWS TO COMMUNITIES

A conversation with Wolde Tadesse, the Christensen Fund, and Girma Zenebe, Culture and Arts Society of Ethiopia

The Christensen Fund, a California-based family foundation, dedicates its grant making to “maintaining the rich diversity of the world — biological and cultural — over the long run.” Its mission draws on the idea that “these diversities have evolved over vast time through both evolutionary and historical processes and human acts of creativity, adaptation and learning.” The foundation focuses on five geographic regions: the Greater South West (Southwest U.S.A. and Northwest Mexico); Central Asia and Turkey; the African Rift Valley (especially Southwest Ethiopia and Northern Kenya); Northern Australia; and Melanesia.

The foundation’s mission implicitly challenges a “business-as-usual” approach to relationships among grant makers, intermediaries, and grantees. Program officer Wolde Tadesse explained the foundation’s stance: “Indigenous communities have managed social crises and their animals and fields for centuries. As funders, we need to appreciate and acknowledge that reality. If we want people to do things ‘our way,’ a large number of communities will always be out of reach.”

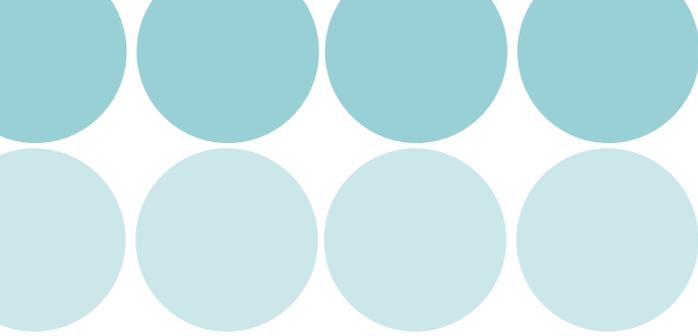
“Intermediary organizations have a role to play as windows to communities,” Tadesse continued. In the African Rift Valley, the foundation works closely with the Culture and Arts Society of Ethiopia (CASE), an intermediary that brings resources to community-based rural associations in Ethiopia.

CASE director Girma Zenebe explained how an intermediary can serve as a “window” between a far-off donor and local grant recipients:

“Our experience with the Christensen Fund is based on two special understandings between us. First, we both acknowledge that local communities have the capacity and knowledge to handle their immediate affairs better than outsiders. Their only (for a lack of a better word) ‘shortcoming’ is inability to read, write, and do calculations. We are convinced that those should not be reasons to deny indigenous people assistance from funders. Second, we both understand that government regulations and the technical requirements of processing grants cannot be bypassed. So, at least for the moment, using an intermediary organization is necessary to reach and work with local communities.

CASE and the Christensen Fund share an underlying purpose of easing the burden of modern bureaucracy on local communities. We therefore do several things:

- We developed our own simplified project proposal format, based on the Christensen Fund’s format, in the language of the local people, and a simplified grant agreement between CASE and community associations. We also accept “oral project presentations,” which are later converted to paper proposals.
- We assign CASE staff with knowledge of local languages and cultures to project sites to work with the associations. They are experts in assisting communities in project implementation.
- We provide regular training to members of associations to build their capacity in planning and implementation of project activities, financial management, recording, and reporting. We organize workshops that build understanding and cooperation between local government offices and community associations.
- We assist associations by following up on errands, such as renewing legal certificates, undergoing audit examinations, or reporting to government offices.”



“We look for someone who knows the local side of the problem.”

ALAN OKADA: Everybody makes a decision about risk. What is your acceptable level of risk? We know we can't afford to be chastised on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*. As corporate grant makers with an evolving international grant making program, we look at whether or not an intermediary has experience in the field, whether or not it's working with other donor entities, whether or not it has capacity and representation on the ground.

NATALIA KANEM: We look for someone who knows the local side of the problem. Once ELMA identified children and youth with disabilities as one of our program areas, we looked around for who was good, who had taproots into the various communities we fund across southern Africa. Disabilities is not a popular subject to fund, but it's a distinctive part of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund's work, as big a commitment for them as it is for us. They also focus on other things like HIV care and education, child support, skills building. We feel that our grant to them is extending our reach in a very efficient way. Some of it they do by regranteeing, and some of it they do through their own direct operational activities.

ELAN GARONZIK: It's important to understand deeply how the intermediary operates. We spent a lot of time with the Stephen Lewis Foundation in their offices and have met with their leadership several times to have a clear idea of how they're getting money to the ground. I would advise somebody considering funding an intermediary to do their own due diligence about how and where the organization operates, how they reach out, and do they have the, for lack of a better word, "authenticity" of staff or consultants on the ground, especially when the work is happening at a great distance.

Q: HOW DO YOU DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN A GOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH AN INTERMEDIARY ORGANIZATION?

NATALIA KANEM: If you can get there, go and see what they're doing. If your budget does not allow you to go and see, you'll need to develop an extremely reliable partnership with people on the ground who represent the people you claim to be helping. Don't abdicate responsibility for finding out in a firsthand way. We always reserve the right to go and visit the regrantee. We visit before the grant close outs, go and talk to the refugees, ask how's it going, what did you like, how was your experience. Not as a vote of confidence about the particular grant, but just to satisfy yourself that you've seen the results with your own eyes.

ALAN OKADA: In the broadest sense, our mandate is to be effective grant makers in all the countries where Citicorp does business. We have mechanisms for identifying potential grantees in those countries and managing a proposal review process. We carry those out in concert with our public affairs people on the ground in 100 countries. All of our people in the field help with sourcing potential relationships, and there's a constant dialogue going on about the most appropriate way for them to identify and provide support to NGOs in their countries.

KEN WILSON: If foundations are too demanding, intermediaries can discover that they need to focus more on the funder's needs than on those of the communities.

DEVELOPING A STRATEGY FOR WORKING THROUGH INTERMEDIARIES

A conversation with Sarah Hobson, New Field Foundation

When we began operations in 2004, we very consciously chose to spend the first two years doing slightly broader, more experimental grant making while we were developing our mission, vision, values, and strategy. A key decision by our board early on was to allocate resources for staff to research the area that we thought we might be funding: supporting women and their families who are overcoming poverty, violence, and injustice in sub-Saharan Africa.

In the first two years, we looked for partner organizations that were already funding in similar areas, so that we could learn from them. We made grants, for example, to the Global Fund for Women, Firelight Foundation, Africa Women's Development Fund, and World Education. Part of the arrangement was that they would share information and help us to learn what it takes to do thoughtful grant making.

From this emerged our focus on supporting the capacity of rural women's organizations in sub-Saharan Africa. The next big question was how to do that. A lot of the national and international NGOs don't reach rural women — by which we mean that it's pretty rare to find organizations that are actually getting money into the hands of rural women to manage themselves. Yet rural women in many parts of Africa are very well organized and have formed themselves into rural associations or agricultural cooperatives. We found out that there's capacity in those organizations, but not a lot of experience with receiving external funds.

We didn't want to want to make direct grants to many of the rural women's groups themselves because a lot of them are quite small and we're so far away. It seemed much more appropriate to fund provincial, national, or regional intermediary organizations that have strong relationships with rural women's associations, so that they in turn can make community-based grants.

Some of the organizations we fund do not have a lot of experience in grant making. We therefore provide information such as selection criteria, application forms, sample contracts, and reporting guidelines that they can adapt for their community grantees. We also provide them with information about the U.S. Treasury requirements so they understand why we're asking them so many questions and why we need particular kinds of financial and organizational information. We have a local representative who's a program consultant in our focus areas, and she's the person who has regular contact with the groups. So she can provide information and check in with them, and they can check in with her.

For example, if the intermediary doesn't qualify as the foreign equivalent of a 501(c)3 public charity, it may be dealing with onerous reporting requirements. As a foundation, we've learned to respect the challenges and role of CASE [the Ethiopian intermediary featured in the box on page 7 of this guide]. Similarly, we've had to recognize that because CASE seeks to add significant value to its beneficiaries through capacity building, it requires significant overhead to avoid being stretched too thin.

Our relations with CASE have been kept healthy through a web of connection involving not only our program and executive staff but also our grants administrative staff, who have visited the CASE team in the field, and through continuous honest and friendly communication. Some of that communication includes the community beneficiaries of the grants CASE makes.

CASE has also partnered strategically with the foundation in a number of other cultural arenas, including research and publication on subjects as diverse as local language dictionaries, culturally important aromatic plants, contemporary poetry, and traditional veterinary knowledge.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR WHEN SELECTING AN INTERMEDIARY ORGANIZATION: A MATRIX

Use this matrix to review what intermediaries can do and prioritize the functions that are most important to you. It can help you figure out what more you need to know about intermediaries' approaches, track records, expertise, and qualifications. Some of these might be functions you can do yourself.

FUNCTION OR EXPERTISE	DESCRIPTION	HOW IMPORTANT TO US?
GRANT MAKING	Clear and effective process to regrant our funds to other entities, including administration, reporting, and due diligence.	
LEGAL EXPERTISE	Ability to advise on legal matters, including U.S. Treasury regulations.	
TAX DEDUCTION	Donations qualify for a tax benefit.	
MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP	Efficient and accountable management of funds, as demonstrated by financial controls, administrative structure, and adequate resources for sustainability.	
THOUGHT PARTNERS	Help us use on-the-ground insights to develop new strategies to address the problems we're working on.	
CAPACITY BUILDING	Capacity to provide technical assistance or support to meet the needs of grantees and the communities and sectors in which they work.	
LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING	Commitment and capacity to share information with funders, grantees, the public, and other stakeholders. Systems for evaluating and compiling lessons learned and results from grantees.	
ISSUE- OR REGION-SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE	Contextual, cultural, and/or language expertise for a specific issue area or geographic region, perhaps including field presence. Knowledge of laws for NGO operations and accepting foreign donations in the country where the grant making will take place. Familiarity with the political landscape and policy issues.	
LOCAL ACCESS AND NETWORKS	Relationships with local communities and connections with a larger community of people and institutions. Ability to cross boundaries of race, ethnicity, religion, class, etc.	
LEVERAGE	Ability to leverage funds, resources, and connections with other programs and institutions to help reach the objectives.	